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ABSTRACT

Noting that educators agree that involving parents in their children's education improves students' school performance, this paper offers strategies that teachers, schools, and districts can use to help parents feel welcome as partners in their children's education. The strategies discussed in the paper are for educators to: communicate frequently with parents; engage in 2-way communication with parents; provide a variety of activities for parents; meet with parents on their own turf; overcome barriers to parent participation; set up a parent or family resource center; establish the position of family or parent involvement coordinator; provide training for parents; provide training to staff on working with parents; support staff in efforts to involve parents; and develop a sense of community. (RS)

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SPECIAL REPORT

Welcoming Parents at Your School: *Strategies that Work*

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Welcoming Parents at Your School: Strategies that Work

by Susan G. Tomlinson

Educators agree. Involving parents in their children's education improves students' school performance. *Convincing* parents to become involved is less simple. To be successful at attracting parent participation, schools need to make parents feel welcome. Parents must believe that school is a place for them, too. Parents must feel that they are capable of making a contribution to their children's education that is both significant to their child's achievement and valued by the school.

There are many kinds of activities that parent involvement can and should include:

- supporting and engaging in learning activities with children at home
- communicating with school staff
- volunteering or being paid to provide assistance at their child's school
- contributing to school decision-making or advocacy activities

(Macfarlane, 1995, p. 16)

Teachers, schools, and districts can use the following strategies to help parents feel welcome as partners in their children's education. Some are simple, some require greater effort. All can positively impact your school community.

Communicate frequently with parents.

Teachers should communicate with parents as often as possible. Studies show that the more frequent the communication with the school, the more comfortable parents become with the child's teacher and other school staff. In addition to relaying special concerns or problems, teachers can share the following types of information with parents:

- the progress their child is making
- what the class is studying
- questions they can ask their children about schoolwork
- activities they can do at home to support classroom learning
- upcoming class or school events
- volunteer opportunities

Engage in two-way communication with parents.

It's important that communication between parents and school staff be two-way whenever possible. Parents need to be listened to, as well as asked to listen. Here are some ways to keep the flow going both ways:

- Include tear-off response sheets in newsletters that are sent home so parents can respond with written comments, questions, etc.
- Engage in face-to-face conversations with parents as frequently as is feasible.
- Phone parents regularly, or establish times when parents can call in to speak with teachers or other staff. (Principals have reported enthusiastic response to designated office hours during which parents can stop by or phone in.)
- Work to make your parent/teacher organization a lively forum for parent-teacher interaction.
- Involve parents in significant school decision making, such as discipline and dress policies, curriculum, staff evaluation, etc.

Provide a variety of activities for parents.

The school should provide frequent opportunities for parents to come to the school. A wide variety helps ensure that there will be activities that suit different parents' needs, interests, and comfort levels. In-school activities can include:

- social events, like an open house
- musical or drama performances and sports events
- family science night, family read-along night, or other—preferably noncompetitive—family events
- parent/teacher or family/teacher conferences
- workshops for parents, where information can be shared about how to help their children with schoolwork and how to foster their children's motivation to learn

Low-level participation, such as attending an open house or a performance, has value in part because it can serve as the first step toward getting parents to feel welcome at school. The chance to associate with other parents and with staff at such events can provide a gateway to involvement with activities more closely tied to the educational mission of the school.

Meet with parents on their own turf.

Sometimes it can be important—especially with hard-to-reach parents—to make an effort to meet parents away from the school. Home visits by principals, teachers, and other staff can communicate a strong message to parents about the level of commitment the school has to their child's success. Gatherings can also be arranged at other meeting sites, such as community centers, places of worship, and the public library. Meetings

should be utilized not only to impart information, but also to demonstrate interest in, and respect for, concerns and ideas parents wish to share. Parents can also be recruited to reach out to nonparticipating parents through activities and organizations outside the school.

Overcome barriers to parent participation.

There are practical obstacles that can prevent even the most interested parents from participating, such as limited English proficiency, childcare needs, transportation problems, schedule conflicts, etc. Many of these barriers can be overcome with some consideration for parents' needs and with adequate preplanning. Some ways to help include:

- Translate print communications into the languages of families who have limited English proficiency. (Often parent volunteers can assist with translation.)
- Arrange for simultaneous translation at events or meetings.
- Offer childcare at school events.
- Provide transportation to events. (Recruit other parents, staff, or school vehicles.)
- Schedule events at a variety of times—day, evening, weekend—so that differing work and home schedules will be accommodated.
- Survey parents to determine what factors will make their participation easier and respond in whatever ways possible.

Set up a parent or family resource center.

Parent or family resource centers are a tangible indication to parents that their presence at school is welcome and encouraged. (Bermúdez, 1994, p. 57) Parents, as well as staff, should have input into decisions about the design, resources, and activities of the center. Sometimes centers can function as collaborative projects with contributions and responsibilities divided between local businesses, a college or university, the school, the district, and parents. Some resources and services parent centers can provide include:

- parenting books, videotapes, and audiotapes for lending
- booklets and brochures that parents can keep
- children's books, toys, and games
- workshops on parenting skills and ways to support children's learning
- literacy training for parents
- volunteer training
- opportunities to meet and share with other parents
- computer and Internet access

Establish the position of family or parent involvement coordinator.

The existence of a trained professional or paraprofessional responsible for facilitating parent involvement sends a strong message to both parents and staff that your school or district considers parent participation a priority. The coordinator can serve a number of functions:

- program and event coordinator
- resource person for both parents and staff
- director of the parent resource center
- parent workshop provider
- staff development provider
- liaison between home and school
- assessor of parent needs and concerns

Some characteristics of a person well suited to the position of parent coordinator include: friendly personality, empathy with parents, background in education and in working with children, excellent communication and training skills, listening skills, ability to have a flexible schedule, and the ability to speak the language of non-English speaking parents. (Macfarlane, 1995, p. 14) The parent coordinator should be provided with an adequate budget for carrying out significant activities in support of parents' and teachers' efforts.

Provide training for parents.

A wide variety of training should be offered to parents to increase their ability to participate at home, in the school, and in the community. One goal will be to give parents the information they need to feel confident in their ability to help their children. Establish school priorities for parent training, but also ask parents what kinds of training they would find most useful. Build in opportunities for parents to share their experiences with each other and to offer each other mutual support. Parents with limited English proficiency can benefit greatly—and can become more involved—if offered ESL instruction. To facilitate parents' participation in school decision making and in advocacy, provide training that increases awareness of school functioning and current research into effective schools.

Provide training to staff on working with parents.

Most teachers did not receive training in communicating with or involving parents while in teacher education programs. Inservice training must make up for this lack. School staff will have greater enthusiasm and skills for working with parents if they have had training that emphasizes benefits and offers practical techniques. The following components have been identified as contributing to a successful staff development program:

- Provide information about the potential of family involvement.
- Offer insights into family diversity.
- Teach skills for both verbal and written communication with family members.
- Examine decision-making roles for parents and other family members.
- Provide information about education programs targeted to families.
- Offer practice in developing and facilitating at-home learning activities.

(Birch, 1996, pp. 68-9.)

Support staff in efforts to involve parents.

School administrators should show support for the efforts of staff to promote parent participation. This support can consist of:

- funds for materials, additional staff, or training
- staff development opportunities
- visible participation and leadership by administrators in activities directed at parents
- recognition of parent volunteers
- positive feedback and recognition of staff efforts to involve parents

Develop a sense of community.

“It is important to design interventions that are comprehensive, systematic, long term, and involve parents as integral members of the school team.”

— Andrea B. Bermúdez

Perhaps most important to the creation of a welcoming atmosphere is to foster a sense of teamwork and community at your school. Find ways to allow families, staff, and students to get to know one another. Always show respect for parents' thoughts and concerns and expect respect in return. Emphasize your shared goal of providing children with a superior education. Don't limit parent participation to superficial activities. Help them with the complex issues they face in raising their children, and invite them to take part in the difficult decisions involved in governing your school.

Selected Resources

- At Home in Our Schools*. 1995. Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center. (\$14.95)
- Birch, David A. 1996. *Step by Step to Involving Parents in Health Education*. Santa Cruz, CA: ETR Associates. (\$24.95)
- Bermúdez, Andrea B. 1994. *Doing Our Homework: How Schools Can Engage Hispanic Communities*. Charleston, WV: ERIC/CRESS. (\$12.00)
- Carfora, Jeanne and Mary Lou O'Rourke. 1997. *Family Resource Center Handbook: How to Establish and Manage a Family Resource Center*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC/EDINFO Press. (\$29.95)
- Henderson, Anne T. and Nancy Berla, eds. 1994. *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law in Education. (\$14.95)
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